

Matthew 12:38-40

Introduction

1. There are numerous difficult Bible passages, but one of the most difficult is Matthew 12:38-40.
2. Matthew records these words of Jesus. (Matt. 12:38-40).

MAT 12:38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."

MAT 12:39 But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;

MAT 12:40 for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

3. "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You."
4. But He answered and said to them, "an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and {yet} no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

"Teacher, We Want To See A Sign From You." (Matt. 12:38a).

1. The scribes and Pharisees wanted Jesus to give them "a sign."
 - a. It is inferred they wanted a miraculous sign.
 - b. They wanted a different sign from the healings and exorcisms that He was doing to demonstrate He was the Messiah.
 - c. John 3:2 shows Jesus had done "signs" that convinced Nicodemus and others He was One from God.
2. Matthew 12:22-24 reveals the Jewish leaders believed Jesus could do miracles, but they charged Jesus did it by Beelzebul the ruler of demons.

Jesus' Response

1. "An evil [wicked] and adulterous (faithless) generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet." (Matt. 12:39).
 - a. Jesus calls them "an evil and adulterous generation." (Matt. 16:4; 17:17; Jas. 4:4; Rev. 2:20).
 - b. Jesus refused to perform a miracle.
 - c. What kind of sign would have convinced them and how many more signs would they demand?
 - d. One can be confident that no sign would satisfy these evil men.

- e. He healed all kinds of diseases, the deaf, lame, the dumb, the blind. He cast out demons, walked on water, and even raised the dead, but none of these things convinced them Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.
2. Jesus gave them "the sign of Jonah the prophet." (Matt. 12:40a).
- a. Jonah affords a type of the resurrection because of his experience in the sea creature.
 - b. Jonah was "three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster."
- The Hebrew "dag" designates sea creatures of undefined species.
 - "Sea monster" comes from the Greek "ketos." (1) The word can refer to any "sea monster" such as "a whale, or shark." (2) The O.T. has "great fish." (Jon. 1:19). (3) The NIV has "huge fish." (Matt. 12:40). (4) The term "whale" in the K.J.V. and the R.S.V. is not a translation, but an interpretation. It may or may not be correct.

Question

1. There is a question whether a whale can swallow a human, but there are examples of sperm whales swallowing humans.
2. Today there are no whales in the Mediterranean sea.
3. This does not mean such whales did not exist in Jonah's day.

This Passage Has A Great Difficulty

Jesus says "so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matt. 12:40b).

1. Jesus affirms the Son of Man would be in the heart of the earth "three days and three nights." (Matt. 12:40b).
 - a. It has reference to the Septuagint translation of Jonah 2:1.
 - b. "Now the Lord had commanded a great whale [Gr. ketos] to swallow up Jonas: and Jonas was in the belly of the whale [Gr. ketos] three days and three nights."
2. This phrase means today a period of 72 hours or something close.

Traditional View

1. According to the traditional view of the day Christ was put to death and raised from the tomb, He was not in the tomb for "three days and three night" (72 hours).
2. Our Lord was crucified on Friday, the day before the Sabbath. (Mk. 15:42).

MAR 15:42 And when evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath,

- a. Jesus died late on Friday and was buried before sunset. (Lk. 23:50-24:1).

LUK 23:50 And behold, a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man
 LUK 23:51 (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God;

LUK 23:52 this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

LUK 23:53 And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain.

LUK 23:54 And it was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

LUK 23:55 Now the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed after, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid.

LUK 23:56 And they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

LUK 24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared.

b. He was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. (Matt. 27:59, 66).

c. He was in the tomb Saturday and Saturday night.

d. He was raised early Sunday from the dead. (Matt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1).

3. The gospel writers give us this information.

a. Mark says "very early." (Mk. 16:12). (1) Mark tells us the Sabbath "was over." (Mk. 16:1). NASB; NIV (2) Mark reports it was "the first day of the week." (Mk. 16:9).

b. Matthew says the women came to the sepulchre "late on the Sabbath day."

(1) He immediately states that it was "as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week."

(2) It was Matthew's intention to indicate that the empty tomb was discovered at or very near dawn-the first appearance of light.

(3) The Sabbath had officially ended at sunset on Saturday.

(4) The preposition "opse" signifies "after" when used with the genitive.

(5) It should be rendered "after the Sabbath." NASB; NIV

4. This means Jesus was in the tomb 1 full day - (Sat.) 2 nights (Fri. & Sat.) 2 Part days - (Fri. & Sun) .

What Is The Solution To This Problem?

1. Some assert Jesus erred, but those who believe in an infallible Christ reject this view.

2. Others seek to change the traditional day of Christ's death from Friday to Thursday.

a. It is argued Jesus died and was buried on Thursday, but this view does not completely satisfy the "three days and three nights."

b. This would put Jesus in the tomb 3 nights - Thursday, Friday and Saturday night.

c. It puts Jesus in the tomb 4 days - 2 full days (Friday and Saturday) and parts of 2 days (Thursday evening and Sunday morning).

d. Jesus would not have been in the tomb 72 hours until late Sunday afternoon whereas the Bible tells us He was

raised from the dead early Sunday morning.

3. Others place the death of Jesus on Wednesday, but this view has many difficulties.

Tomb

1. This view puts Christ in the tomb 3 full days - Thursday, Friday and Saturday.
2. It puts Him in the tomb an additional 2 part days - Wednesday and Sunday.
3. It places Him in the tomb 4 nights - Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.
4. Some who hold to this view maintain Jesus was raised on Saturday, but contradicts Mark 16:9 and Matthew, Mark, Luke and John who all record Jesus was raised the first day of the week.

Evidence For Traditional View

- Let us look at the evidence supporting the traditional view that Jesus died on Friday and was raised early Sunday morning.
 - The evidence is strong.
1. Jesus had prophesied His death and resurrection on the third day. (Matt. 16:21; 20:19; Jn. 2:19,20).
 - a. "After three days" (Matt. 27:63; Mk. 8:31).
 - b. "On the third day" (Matt. 16:21; Lk. 9:22).
 - c. "In three days" (Matt. 26:61; Jn. 2:19).
 2. These phrases all signify the same period of time since they all refer to the same event.
 3. Paul tells us Jesus was raised on the third day. (1 Cor. 15:3,4).
 4. Peter confirms Jesus was raised "up on the third day." (Acts 10:40).
 5. According to Jewish reckoning any part of a day was a day.
 6. The language of Jesus "three days and three nights" is another way of asserting He would be in the tomb 3 days and would be raised on the third day.
 - a. It does not denote 72 hours.
 - b. It is idiomatic for portions of three days.
 - c. There is a similar example in the book of Esther. (Esth. 4:16; 5:1).

EST 4:16 "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."

EST 5:1 Now it came about on the third day that Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace in front of the king's rooms, and the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room, opposite the entrance

to the palace.

(1) It is not definite a 72 hour period elapsed.

(2) She appeared before Ahasuerus on the third day.

7. In the book of Tobit 3:12 it reads:

a. "Ate not nor drank not for three days and three nights."

b. Yet it says in the very next verse, "Then on the third day," the fast being ended.

Another Lesson We Learn From This Account

1. Jesus accepted the account of Jonah and "the whale" as fact, not fiction.

2. This story may seem incredible, but it is fact.

3. Jonah was "swallowed" by "the great fish" and was kept alive by God. (Jon. 1:19).

a. The sperm whale, sharks, and other sea-monsters are capable of swallowing a man.

b. Plus the Bible says "Jehovah prepared a great fish."

c. It is not to be explained naturally, but was a miracle.

d. Those who accept it as a miracle have few if any problems.

e. Those who try to explain the passage naturally have great problems.

Day Of Christ's Death

1. Matthew places it on the day following Jesus and His disciples eating the Passover supper. (Matt. 26:17).

a. The Passover lamb had been slain that day - the 14th of Nisan. See Mark 14:12; Lk. 22:7,8).

b. Jesus ate the Passover on the night before He died. (Matt. 26:17; Mk. 14:12; Lk. 22:7,8).

c. Jesus and His disciples ate the feast "when even was come." (Matt. 26:20).

d. The Passover was killed between the evenings. (Exod. 12:6).

(1) The Jews had 2 evening - one from 3:00 P.M. to sunset and the other from sunset to 9:00 P.M. (or to the end of the first watch).

(2) The paschal supper was commonly eaten after the setting of the sun and often in the night. (Exod. 12:8).

e. The lamb was slain the 14th of Nisan and was eaten that night (15th of Nisan) along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. (Exod. 12:8, 15, 18).

2. John's account leaves the impression Jesus ate the Passover a day early. (Jn. 18:28; 19:31).

JOH 18:28 They led Jesus therefore from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium in order that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.

JOH 19:31 The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.

- a. John's way of using the Passover is different from the Synoptic writers.
- b. John seems to use the word "Passover" to include the 7 day feast of unleavened bread.
- c. The Synoptic writers used it to refer to the actual Passover feast.

Jewish Leaders

1. The Jewish leaders did not want to be disqualified from participating in the rest of the services of the feast of unleavened bread. The Jews did not want the bodies of Jesus and the thieves to mar the sanctity of the Sabbath (Saturday).
2. Friday was called "the Preparation" because they prepared for the Sabbath that day.
3. The Sabbath (Saturday) was called "a high day." (Jn. 19:31).
 - a. The Sabbath of the Passover week was considered to have special sanctity.
 - b. It was forbidden to leave the body of a criminal on a tree overnight. (Deut. 21:22,23).
 - c. They wanted to hasten the death of Jesus and the thieves. (Jn. 19:31-34).
 - d. They asked the Roman soldiers to do something that would not come to pass, that is, break the legs of Jesus. (Jn. 19:32-36).

Synoptics And John

1. The Synoptic Gospels state that Jesus ate the Passover on the night before He died. (Matt. 26:17; Mk. 14:12; Lk. 22:7,8).
2. They also state that the disciples prepared the Passover. (Matt. 26:19; Mk. 14:16; Lk. 22:13).
3. Most scholars think that the meal mentioned in John 13 was the same as the Synoptic Passover. (John 13:1,2).
4. Both Mark and John agree the day of Jesus' death was Friday before the Sabbath. (Mk. 15:42; John 19:31).
5. There is a problem between the Synoptic Gospels and John concerning the date of the meal.
 - a. John's gospel infers Jesus might have eaten the meal before the regular Passover and died before the Passover supper. (Jn. 13:29; 18:28).
 - b. The Synoptics indicate Jesus ate the Passover meal and then died on the 15th of Nisan after the Passover supper.
6. There are several possible solutions to this alleged contradiction.

a. One solution concerns the meaning of "feast."

(1) The word "feast" in John 18:28 refers to the entire festival of unleavened bread since elsewhere "the feast" is used by John to mean the entire festival. (Jn. 2:23; 4:45; 6:4; 11:55,56; 12:12).

(2) The expression "eat the Passover" was used popularly for the entire feast and this is what John had in mind in John 18:28.

b. The Synoptic Gospels referred the "Passover" to the meal proper.

This solution harmonizes the following.

1. Jesus ate the Passover meal on Thursday night.
2. It has Jesus dying on the 15th of Nisan - Friday afternoon.

Another Possible Solution

1. Another possible solution is that different calendars were followed by the Pharisees and the priests who were mainly Sadducees.
2. This position received additional support from the Dead Sea Scrolls in which the Qumran community is described as following a different calendar from that observed at the temple.
 - a. It is contended that according to the calendar Jesus was following He had observed the Passover but the temple authorities were following a another calendar according to which the sacrificial victims were slain on the day Jesus died and their Passover was observed the following night.
 - b. It is thought John may have been indicating that Jesus died as the Passover lamb at the time the lambs were being killed in the temple in preparation for the Passover Feast. (Jn. 19:36).

Closing Comments

1. At the present time not enough is known about the various calendars and how they were used at that time to come to a definite conclusion on this argument.
2. It seems preferable to refer the "feast" in John 13:29 and "the Passover" in John 18:28 to the entire festival.
3. Yet the Sadducees and Jesus may have held to two different dates for observing the Passover.
4. We may never know all the answers to some of date issues, but we can be confident that Jesus was raised on the third day and was seen of more than 500 witnesses. (1 Cor. 15:1-8).
5. He is the pledge to our resurrection. (1 Cor. 15:20-23).

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